

SPEECH of WILLIAM WILLARD DAVIS, Esq.  
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Friends and fellow citizens, white and colored:

On the 4<sup>th</sup> day of July, 1776, our revolutionary fathers, sitting in the most solemn convention ever held, declared that certain truths are self-evident: "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights: that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." These are momentous truths boldly asserted. They should be written in letters of living light on the opening portals of the future. They should be the watchword of every American citizen who loves universal liberty. These truths are slowly but surely destroying slavery and serfdom of all kinds throughout the world. They are "a pillar of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night" to guide the feet and cheer the hearts of the down trodden and oppressed of all nations.

The truth that "all men are created equal" is carved in every line of God's Holy Law. What did Thomas Jefferson mean when he penned that line? He meant, without doubt, that all men—white, red, or black are equal in all their rights and occupy the "same position before the law," of God and man. When those great men met in convention to form our National Constitution, eleven years after the Declaration of Independence, they were divided on the

question of slavery. A minority proposed to insert in that great Constitution an express and positive guaranty for slavery. This was defeated and a provision inserted, by way of compromise, which merely, by implication recognized the existence of the institution, without attempting to assert it as a right, viewing it as a forced service, neither commended nor forbidden, but left to enlighten public sentiment to push it along to final extinction. The word slave or slavery is not found in the Constitution, and many of those great and good men expected that as civilization advanced, slavery would cease. But how different the result; as the great staples of the south—rice, sugar, and cotton—increased in value, so did slave labor, until the whole south seemed to worship slavery, instead of the only true and living God, and as the years rolled on, the institution became so gigantic that it threatened to swallow up all other interests, and was casting its dark shadows over all the states and territories, and was clamoring for universal domain, when God in his providence, and in His inscrutable way, decreed that slavery should die by the hands of its friends and supporters. More than two hundred years you had been deprived of every valuable right except life. You had been deprived of your right to liberty, and “the pursuit of happiness.” The Constitutional amendment, that glorious *magna charta* of your liberty, became law December 19, 1865, and you are now freemen. You should not however harbor any malice toward your late masters. For while it is true that all the Southern states held you in an iron bondage until forced to give you liberty, it is also true that several of the older Northern states held you as slaves a

large part of the past century, until by their own free will they abolished the institution. It is also true that many of your best friends held you in slavery, by mere compulsion of State law, when in fact, they were conscious of its great wrong, but could not free you without violating our State Constitution. I was all my life the owner of a few slaves inherited and I know that no man rejoiced more over their emancipation than I did. And although it took the most desolating civil war known to history to free you, I know that it would take a more terrible war to enslave you again, and the effort would ignominiously fail. While your highest interest requires you to forget and forgive the past; while you bury the great wrongs of the past and look with longing to your immediate future, freighted as it is with weal or woe to you, do you consider that your liberty is perfect and that its guarantees are sufficient to maintain and fully develop that liberty now so dear to you? Do you feel like the proud eagle as he escapes from his iron cage of fears and soars against the sun, bathing his plumage in the free air of Heaven, that you can now without let or hindrance seek your happiness throughout the whole earth. Answering from my knowledge of your wants, I say you cannot. First—Kentucky denies you the right to testify in any case where a white person is a party concerned. Your people in this state in 1860 numbered more than two hundred and thirty six thousand souls, and that is nearly the correct number now. You form a large part of her laboring population and produce a large amount of her annual revenues, and still she denies you this great right. True the legislature, ir., February, 1866, gave you the

right to acquire and own property by gift, by purchase, and by descent, with the right to transmit it; she also gave you the "right to sue and be sued." This was not going half way. What is your property and your lives worth without the means of that complete protection, derived from the enforcement of all those legal remedies enjoyed by your white neighbors? The present law of Kentucky regarding testimony, in your case, is mere mockery of justice. It allows you to make affidavit against a white person who may have annoyed you in person or property, and on this affidavit process issues, and the offender is brought into court, but there you stop: if your witnesses are colored, your case fails because the State Courts will not hear them. This is a monstrous wrong, and I believe the next legislature will remove it. I know that undue prejudice against your race has shed its damning blight, like mildew, over our whole political fabric: that it stands today in our midst like poisonous Bohan Upas, infusing decay and death into every nerve and sinew of the body- politic: that it has affected alike our unwary youth and mature and reflective age. But I will not despair of our own people. I believe that the spirit of universal liberty, coupled with the magnificent results of free labor, will soon change their minds, and this prejudice against granting you political rights, will die away like the dew of morning, before the splendor of the rising sun. Interest will prove stronger than prejudice, and the interest of both races requires that you should have this right. You can greatly aid your white friends in achieving this great benefit, by being true men and women. Keep sacred all your promises; fulfill to the letter of all your contracts,

whether bad or good. Be honest and law abiding in all your conduct, and you are bound to win from your unwilling white neighbors this great boon. You are also denied what I consider the greatest right a freeman can possess—the right of suffrage. When you were slaves, your masters voted for you; now you are freemen, and no one votes for you. You have no voice in selecting those who are to rule over you, and make the laws under which you live. You are taxed without being represented. This principle is wrong and cannot long endure in a free Republic. God has made every human being a free agent—man's free agency is written in the Holy Scriptures in letters that will never die. The right to act for yourself, or to say who shall act for you, is higher than all human law, and no State can deprive a freeman of this right and be republican in fact. No government can be just and deprive any portion of her citizens of this right. In this respect suffrage is a natural right; the age at which you may exercise it is political and may be altered or amended, and so may a state fix qualifications, but the great original right to vote at some time remains, and cannot be taken from freemen except by despotic force.

But how and when shall you obtain permission to exercise this right? Will our state give it to you? Not for generations to come, it can be prevented by the Democratic party, by which she is now ruled. I would prefer that Kentucky would give you this right; for I love her, with all her rebel, democratic sins. You will soon have this right by an amendment to our National Constitution. Let congress pass the act immediately and submit to all the States for ratification. It

would be an act of simple justice, and the American people would sanction it at the earliest possible moment. Let its provisions apply alike to all the States. Ohio should not ask us to do a thing that she would not do herself. The right to control the question of suffrage was by the National Constitution reserved to the State or to the people. But congress has the right to propose this amendment to the States or to the people, and when voted on by all the States, no one can complain—and this is the only legal way to give you this valuable privilege. If every man in Kentucky was willing to vote for suffrage, it could not be effected by an amendment to our State constitution under seven years. This is due to the peculiar wording of that instrument, which riveted the chains of slavery in such a manner as to crush forever every sentiment in favor of universal liberty. It will not take long to amend the National constitution.

There are many who say you should have the ballot, if you were only qualified. I am opposed to any property qualification. While I am a determined advocate of your education, I am opposed to any educational standard. If the legislature of Kentucky were to enact a law that no man shall vote who cannot read and write then it would disfranchise several thousand white voters in this State. This ought not to be done for many of that class are men excellent sense and have acquired large means. I know a man of wealth in an adjoining county who can neither read nor write a line, who was elected to the legislature, and was afterwards nominated for sheriff of his county by Democracy, and came near being elected. He was then and is now an old iron

side democrat, and that party have, you know, in their ranks, none but men of "sense and refinement." I have always understood that President Andrew Johnson did not know his alphabet until he was twenty four years old, and it was then taught to him by his wife, and I would suppose he was a man of sense, who had swung around the circle from village alderman to the Presidency. (it might have been better for the country if he had never learned his letters.) I am for impartial manhood suffrage, and I would oppose any standard of qualification that did not apply alike to both races. But are you not qualified now to vote? Have you not heard your former masters discuss around the fireside, and table the whole machinery of our Government, and have you not shown your appreciation of its blessings by bearing aloft its glorious flag in the face of the brave armies of the great rebellion? Have you not toiled for years in clearing the farms and building the mansions of your old masters? In short, have you not done enough to prove that you love your country? I know you have.

I would trust you with the ballot today. Men vote their sentiments, and not their intellectual acquirements. I know you vote as you have fought to maintain the Government. I would trust that boy who was once my slave; but who, when his country called for the brawny arm of the colored man to uphold her flag, put on his uniform, and bidding me a kind farewell, said that in the day of battle he would remember me and mine, and that when his time was out he would come home and serve me again. I would trust that boy, who, after four years of hard service, lately returned with honorable scars received in the battles around

Richmond, and immediately seeking my office, stood before me in his improved manhood and said, "I have kept the faith, I have come to fulfill my promise." I know he would vote right.

But why all this prejudice against your voting. Colored men voted in several of the Southern States up until 1837. Those in New York State have voted for years who are worth \$250. They were disfranchised in those Southern States because the exercise of suffrage was damaging to slavery. It looks ungrateful for men who have held you in slavery for years and prevented your education by every possible means, now that you are freemen, to say you are not qualified to vote. I know that more of you can read and write than people generally suppose, and many of you learned it in your humble cabins, as slaves. By the time your friends can possibly give you suffrage, you can achieve more education. You will soon reach the highest niche in Your Temple of Liberty protected by law, and you should improve yourselves for its blessings with every possible energy. Educate yourselves; save your money and buy yourselves homes, so that when you come to vote, you can do it with perfect independence. I have heard member of the Democratic party say that they would buy your vote for a mere song. I didn't believe it. I believe you love your country more than money. When they shall make the attempt, tell them that you have been bought and sold for the last time.

Transcription courtesy:

Tera Warren and Pam Clay-Young, The Kentucky Transportation Cabinet